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Tipsters tough it out

This season's Ericsson Cup competition is proving to be a tipster's nightmare.

Take Gippsland Falcons, for example. A fortnight ago they were humbled 6-1 by Wollongong Wolves, and could well have lost by more. It was a lamentable performance by a team which during the early rounds of the league had shown such commendable fighting spirit. Coach Stuart Munro was simply devastated after the game.

A week later, the Falcons salvaged much of their pride. Last weekend's 1-0 win over in-form Adelaide City ranks as the upset of the season. And this was a victory achieved by virtually the same players who had trooped off Brandon Park in disarray just six days before.

Amazingly, Wollongong also staged a similar form reversal. Their thrashing of the Falcons remains a distant memory in the wake of their own meek capitulation (5-0) at the hands of Adelaide Sharks last weekend. What a difference a week makes, indeed.

Certainly the unpredictable nature of the NSL is something Northern Spirit player/coach Graham Arnold knows only too well. Just when he hoped his team had got their faltering campaign back on track with the much-needed win in Canberra, Arnold discovered just how tenuous that progress has been.

Last weekend's loss to South Melbourne was no disgrace. Souths, after all, are the defending champions and can rightly claim to be the best side in the league.

But what continues to frustrate Arnold is that no improvement is being made in terms of the Spirit's most obvious weakness - their inability to score goals. It was the same old story at Lakeside Stadium as a period of sustained pressure from the Spirit failed to yield any reward, and the

opposition recovered to go on and win the game. New signing Adem Poric made a solid debut, but the problem is not in midfield. It would be easy to single out striker Clayton Zane, but that achieves nothing. Zane needs encouragement and support, and cannot be expected to shoulder the burden on his own.

With one-third of the season gone, time is of the essence to remedy the situation.

The Spirit need to enter the transfer market, although Arnold keeps saying that in terms of ready-made goalscorers, there is not a lot around.

Be that as it may, the search must be stepped up. Arnold has made discreet enquiries this season for Sean Babic (Marconi-Fairfield) and Archie Thompson, who this afternoon appears at North Sydney Oval for the visitors from the Latrobe Valley. In both instances, he met a brick wall.

With just seven goals in 10 starts, the root cause of the Spirit's ordinary start to the season is obvious. And until the club can find the right man to buy, it is up to the current squad to try and turn things around. Arnold will continue to experiment against the Falcons in an effort to strike the right blend, and in the meantime we must all be patient.

The way the script has been written, today's match should go the Spirit's way. But Gippsland, who perhaps operate on the leanest budget in the league, have shown on more than one occasion that they love nothing better than lowering the colours of more fancied opposition.

It shapes up as an intriguing contest. But one, in truth, that the Spirit simply have to win.

*Michael Cockerill is a sportswriter for

BY MICHAEL COCKERILL

**northern
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Scales of Justice!

SPiRiT enforcer Paul Bilokapic is a man of appetites - but he's had to curb one of them.

His appetite for success remains as hearty as ever, it's the love-affair with fast food that's over.

The towering midfielder has replaced the burgers and fries with chicken and salads - and saved his career in the process.

Coach Graham Arnold told the former Sydney United skipper he had a fat chance of staying at North Sydney Oval unless he shaved eight kilos from his formidable frame.

And he put his money where his mouth was, paying the 22-year-old \$100 for each kilo shed from his 100kg bulk.

The cash was part repayment of a \$2000 fine Bilokapic incurred after being sent off in round two against Perth Glory.

Bilokapic took the bait and off poured the weight. He's now down to within a kilo of his 92kg target in the continuing crusade against calories.

Profits at his local McDonald's might have tumbled since his enforced fast, but Bilokapic's fortunes are on a steep upward trajectory.

About as mobile as a Mack Truck at the

beginning of the season, he is now purring along like a Porsche.

"I did enjoy a McDonald's meal but those days are well and truly over," he says. "I've lost so much weight I reckon I could teach Jenny Craig a thing or two.

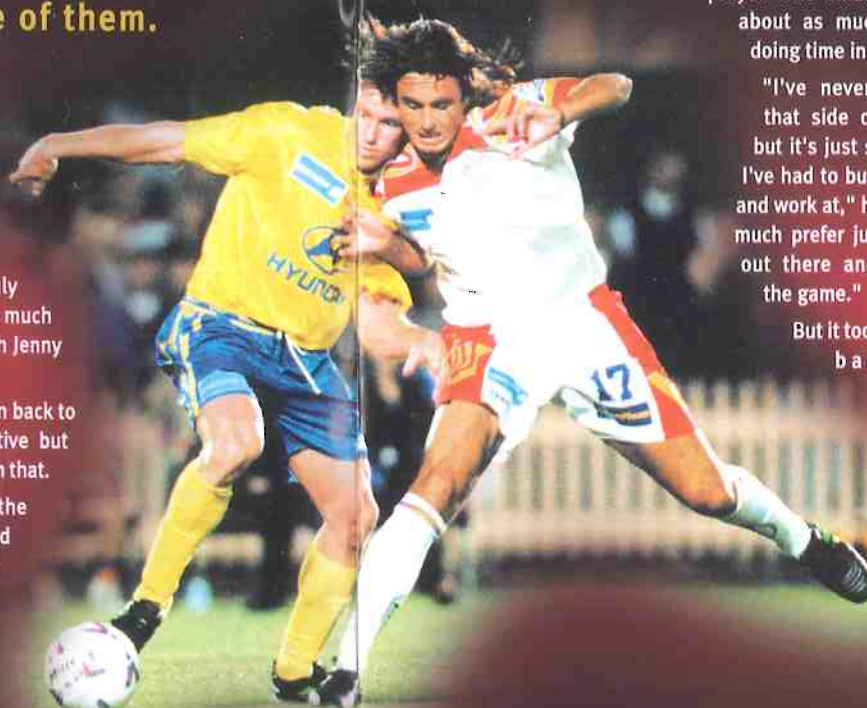
"Getting part of my fine given back to me was certainly an incentive but there was a lot more to it than that.

"I'd been injured during the build-up to the season and had put on a few kilos. As a result I wasn't doing myself justice on the pitch and changes to my diet needed to be made.

"I must confess I feel a lot lighter on my feet and much sharper in the tackle since cutting down on the fatty foods.

"I think my game is beginning to come together after a shaky start to the year."

To keep the kilos coming off, Bilokapic power walks most days after twice-daily training sessions with his teammates.



That's quite a transformation for a player who finds training about as much fun as doing time in a gulag.

"I've never enjoyed that side of football but it's just something I've had to buckle down and work at," he adds. "I much prefer just getting out there and playing the game."

But it took a verbal battering from

Arnold to turn Bilokapic from swollen to svelte.

"I didn't pull any punches and simply told him if he didn't lose the weight he'd be out the door," he says. "He was just too slow on his feet and not doing himself - or the team - any favours.

"But he's applied himself and taken heed of what was said. Now we're beginning to see the best of him.

"He had to realise that professional players have to look after their bodies. It shouldn't have need me point that out but I'm pleased with the end result.

"Apart from a one game ban, he's played in every game for us and that says a lot about how important he is to the team."

Despite his relatively tender age, Bilokapic has already amassed over 100 national soccer league appearances and is an increasingly influential figure in his role as ball-winner at the heart of the Spirit midfield.

NORTHERN SPIRIT NEXT GAME:
Sunday January 3, 7.30pm v Adelaide Sharks at Hindmarsh Stadium
NORTHERN SPIRIT NEXT HOME GAME:
Friday January 8th 7.30pm, v Newcastle Breakers at North Sydney Oval

Spirit's mighty mite

So far this season, the soccer demons have treated Spirit player-coach Graham Arnold with the

tender loving care of a pack of dobermans ripping apart a rag doll. Pre-season injuries to key captures Tony Perinich and Scott Ollerenshaw (Ollerenshaw's being severe enough to warrant his early retirement from the game) and Gabriel Mendez were mere portents of the carnage to come as defender Ian Crook and then flanker Troy Cranney joined the well-worn trail to an overcrowded treatment room.

Then the air turned blue in the dressing room as Arnold hectorated his players over a spate of early-season red cards. The coach's sleeping habits have been further undermined by a chronic shortage of goals.

Yet there's a silver lining amid the clouds of

calamity - the emergence of a trio of captivating kids.

First it was goalkeeper Paul Henderson, then striker Daniel Watkins - now it's the turn of winger Matthew Langdon to impose his presence.

Cranney's pain was Langdon's gain, with the ex-Brisbane Strikers winger's Achilles tendon injury leaving the door ajar for the ambitious

18-year-old to kick aside.

He might look like a refugee from Lilliput, but Langdon compensates for his lack of stature with artistry, bravery and a left foot dextrous enough to shuffle a pack of cards.

An influential debut in round eight against the Strikers was followed up by another mature performance in the 2-1 loss to Sydney United in round nine and an eye-catching display in the 1-0 win against Canberra the following week.

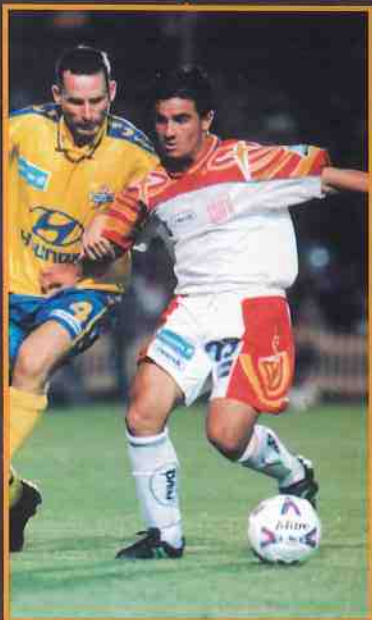
Not bad for a callow apprentice who expected to spend the season attending to the laundry needs of the first team and sharpening his game in the youth squad.

Langdon, who lives at home with his mum and dad at Campbelltown, is savouring his moment in the sun.

Plucked from the Wollongong Wolves in the winter, the Australian under-17 and under-20

representative's cause was championed by the Australian Institute of Sport's Steve O'Connor - the former hard man of the national league.

Once told by Sydney Olympic that he wasn't good enough to make the grade, Langdon was snapped up by IMG - who know a good thing when they see it - and his manager Bernie Manditch negotiated a one-season deal with



the Spirit.

And the club are now certain to take up a two-year option on the arrangement.

"This is just the start for him but he's been steadily improving," says Arnold.

"Right now he looks just about the most comfortable player on the ball in the entire team.

"When he first came to the club his attitude was a bit lackadaisical and he seemed to lack the hunger to succeed.

"But he's stepped up a gear and is keen to show what he can do. Perhaps seeing the other apprentices get a run ahead of him woke him up a bit.

"He's brave, quick and can cross well. But he's

still got a hell of a lot to learn. The key to success is consistency - and that's what he's got to work on."

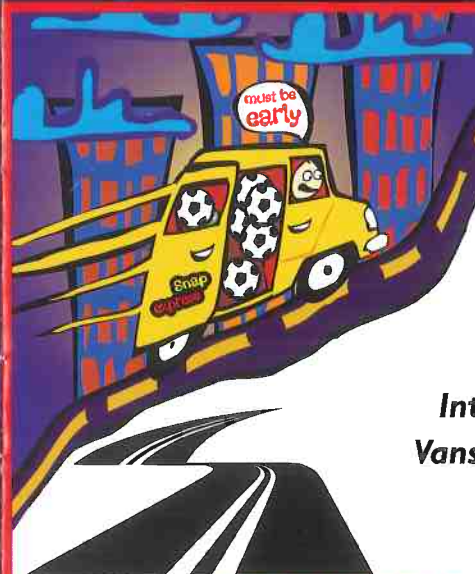
Langdon feels like a bit-part actor who's landed a leading role on Broadway.

"To say I'm ecstatic at being in the side is an understatement," he says.

"It's a big step-up from the youth team. Everything has to be done that much faster. Your touch needs to be better - and so does your concentration.

"I'm also working harder on my fitness because I tend to fade late in games."

While a goal famine has sapped the Spirit's pre-season optimism, Langdon believes a top six finish is still achievable.



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Ericsson Cup Results at a glance

KEY: 1-0 = match result home team - 1, away team - 0 24/1 = match played January 24

HOME ACROSS	AWAY DOWN	Adelaide City	Adelaide Sharks	Brisbane Strikers	Canberra Cosmos	Carlton	Gippsland Falcons	Marconi Fairfield	Melbourne Knights	Newcastle Breakers	NORTHERN SPIRIT	Perth Glory	South Melbourne	Sydney Olympic	Sydney United	Wollongong City
Adelaide City	•	27/12	14/3	31/1	26/1	28/3	10/1	3-0	11/4	2-0	0-1	1-1	25/4	3-2	21/2	
Adelaide Sharks	4/4	•	18/4	24/1	1-1	14/2	7/3	19/3	3-1	3/1	7/2	1-1	4-1	17/1	5-0	
Brisbane Strikers	0-1	9/1	•	21/3	1-0	10/4	3-2	27/2	25/4	6/2	2-2	27/12	26/1	2-2	6/3	
Canberra Cosmos	0-1	1-3	0-1	•	8/3	25/4	1-2	0-2	26/1	0-1	0-5*	11/1	22/2	4/4	8/4	
Carlton	4-1	31/1	21/2	3-0	•	3-0	28/3	17/1	3-0	0-2	11/4	14/3	27/12	28/2	4-0	
Gippsland Falcons	1-0	1-0	3/1	17/1	6/2	•	0-0	0-1	21/2	4/4	0-3	23/1	7/3	18/4	21/3	
Marconi Fairfield	17/4	4-0	23/1	13/2	0-2	27/2	•	3/4	13/3	25/4	20/3	5-3	2-1	2-0	7/1	
Melbourne Knights	14/2	0-1	3-2	14/3	25/4	31/1	27/12	•	28/3	21/2	10/1	0-1	11/4	0-1	1-2	
Newcastle Breakers	TBA	26/2	15/1	2-1	19/3	1-2	1-2	2-2	•	16/4	3-2	12/2	5/2	23/1	2/4	
NORTHERN SPIRIT	5/3	9/4	1-1	19/3	12/2	27/12	15/1	2-1	8/1	•	26/1	26/3	0-2	29/1	1-0	
Perth Glory	24/1	2-1	14/2	28/2	3/1	14/3	2-2	18/4	31/1	2-0	•	2-1	28/3	3-1	17/1	
South Melbourne	21/3	26/1	4/4	18/4	4-4	2-1	21/2	7/2	2-0	2-0	7/3	•	3-1	3/1	3-1	
Sydney Olympic	17/1	14/3	2-1	5-0	4/4	0-0	31/1	3/1	2-1	24/1	3-1	28/2	•	14/2	18/4	
Sydney United	7/2	25/4	21/3	27/12	2-1	10/1	26/1	7/3	1-1	1-0	21/2	11/4	4-0	•	2-1	
Wollongong City	1-1	28/3	1-1	4-2	22-1	6-1	11/4	26/1	27/12	28/2	25/4	31/1	10/1	14/3	•	

Ericsson Cup table:

P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Perth Glory	11	7	2	2	25	14 23
Marconi Fairfield	10	6	2	2	21	13 20
Sydney United	10	5	2	3	16	14 17
South Melbourne	11	6	3	2	23	16 21
Carlton	11	6	2	3	26	11 20
Adelaide Sharks	10	5	2	3	19	12 17
Adelaide City	10	5	2	3	13	10 17
Sydney Olympic	10	5	1	4	18	16 16
Northern Spirit	10	5	1	5	7	12 13
Brisbane Strikers	9	2	4	3	13	14 10
Gippsland Falcons	9	3	2	5	6	16 11
Melbourne Knights	10	3	1	6	10	14 10
Wollongong Wolves	10	3	2	5	16	21 11
Newcastle Breakers	10	2	2	6	12	20 8
Canberra Cosmos	10	0	0	10	6	28 0

Ericsson Cup results Round 11
Newcastle Breakers 2 (S Pryce pen 43min, pen 81min) drew with **Melbourne Knights 2** (I Kelic 7min, H Karl 32 min) at Breakers Stadium. Crowd: 3,312.
Carlton SC 2 (J Tricarico 57min, M Bresciano 89min) def **Marconi 0** at Marconi Stadium. Crowd: 4,235.
Gippsland Falcons 1 (B Macnicol 56min) def **Adelaide City 0** at Mobil Park. Crowd: 1,582.
South Melbourne 2 (M Curcija 31min, pen 54min) def **Northern Spirit 0** at Bob Jane Stadium. Crowd: 6,206.
Adelaide Sharks 5 (A Duric 61min, 66min, R Alagich 72min, D Polimer 88min, J Gibson 89min) def **Wollongong Wolves 0** at Hindmarsh Stadium. Crowd: 2,823.
Sydney Olympic 3 (P Cardozo pen 17min, A Juric 86min, E Augerinos 87min) def **Perth Glory 1** (J Markovski 33min) at Belmore Sports Ground. Crowd: 6,898.
BYE: Sydney United.

Northern Spirit squad statistics

THIS WAY UP →

DATE	OPPONENTS	H/A	SCORE	CROWD	1. JOHN PEROSH
9 OCT	SYDNEY OLYMPIC	H	L 0-2	18,965	2. NICHOLAS PURDUE
18 OCT	PERTH GLORY	A	L 0-2	17,580	3. EDDY BOSNAR
25 OCT	CARLTON SC	A	W 2-1	4,209	4. IAN CROOK
30 OCT	MELB. KNIGHTS	H	W 2-1	13,654	5. MARK RUDAN
6 NOV	WOLL. CITY WILKS	H	W 1-0	14,818	6. LUKE CASSERLY
15 NOV	ADELAIDE CITY	A	L 0-2	4,900	7. KRESIMIR MARUSIC
27 NOV	BYE				8. ROBBIE SLATER
6 DEC	BRISB. STRIKERS	H	D 1-1	15,862	9. GRAHAM ARNOLD
14 DEC	SYDNEY UNITED	A	L 0-1	6,236	10. GABRIEL MENDEZ
20 DEC	CANB. COSMOS	A	W 1-0	17,04	11. TROY CRANNEY
27 DEC	GIPPS. FALCONS	A	L 0-2	6,500	12. JAMES STUBBS MILLS
3 JAN	ADELAIDE SHARKS	H			13. PHIL MOSS
8 JAN	NEWCAST. BREAKERS	H			14. TONY PERINICH
15 JAN	MARCONI FAIRFIELD	H			16. DANIEL WATKINS
24 JAN	SYDNEY OLYMPIC	A			17. PAUL BILOKAPIC
29 JAN	PERTH GLORY	H			18. PAUL WEARNE
6 FEB	SYDNEY UNITED	H			19. CLAYTON ZANE
12 FEB	BRISB. STRIKERS	A			20. PETER BLAZINCIC
21 FEB	CARLTON SC	H			21. MICHAEL CUNICO
28 FEB	MELB. KNIGHTS	A			22. PAUL HENDERSON
5 MAR	WOLL. CITY WILKS	A			23. MATTHEW LANGDON
19 MAR	BYE				25. ROBERT ENES
26 MAR	CANB. COSMOS	H			26. ADAM SNYDER
4 APR	STL. MELBOURNE	H			29. ADEM PORIC
9 APR	GIPPS. FALCONS	A			
16 APR	ADELAIDE SHARKS	A			
23 APR	NEWCAST. BREAKERS	A			
30 APR	MARCONI FAIRFIELD	A			

KEY: • Matches started • Matches as substitute * Indicates Yellow Card • Indicates Red Card • Indicates Goal Scored
 NOTE: A league and Northern Spirit Appearances and Goals updated each round. To gain a League and Northern Spirit Appearances, a player must appear on the team sheet only and does not necessarily have to take part in the match.
 NOTE: The amount of A League Appearances by Robert Enes before he came to the Spirit is unknown.

Northern Spirit Appearances	A League Appearances	A League Goals	1. JOHN PEROSH
0	3	8	2. NICHOLAS PURDUE
0	0	0	3. EDDY BOSNAR
0	0	0	4. IAN CROOK
0	0	0	5. MARK RUDAN
0	0	0	6. LUKE CASSERLY
0	0	0	7. KRESIMIR MARUSIC
0	0	0	8. ROBBIE SLATER
0	0	0	9. GRAHAM ARNOLD
0	0	0	10. GABRIEL MENDEZ
0	0	0	11. TROY CRANNEY
0	0	0	12. JAMES STUBBS MILLS
0	0	0	13. PHIL MOSS
0	0	0	14. TONY PERINICH
0	0	0	16. DANIEL WATKINS
0	0	0	17. PAUL BILOKAPIC
0	0	0	18. PAUL WEARNE
0	0	0	19. CLAYTON ZANE
0	0	0	20. PETER BLAZINCIC
0	0	0	21. MICHAEL CUNICO
0	0	0	22. PAUL HENDERSON
0	0	0	23. MATTHEW LANGDON
0	0	0	25. ROBERT ENES
0	0	0	26. ADAM SNYDER
0	0	0	29. ADEM PORIC

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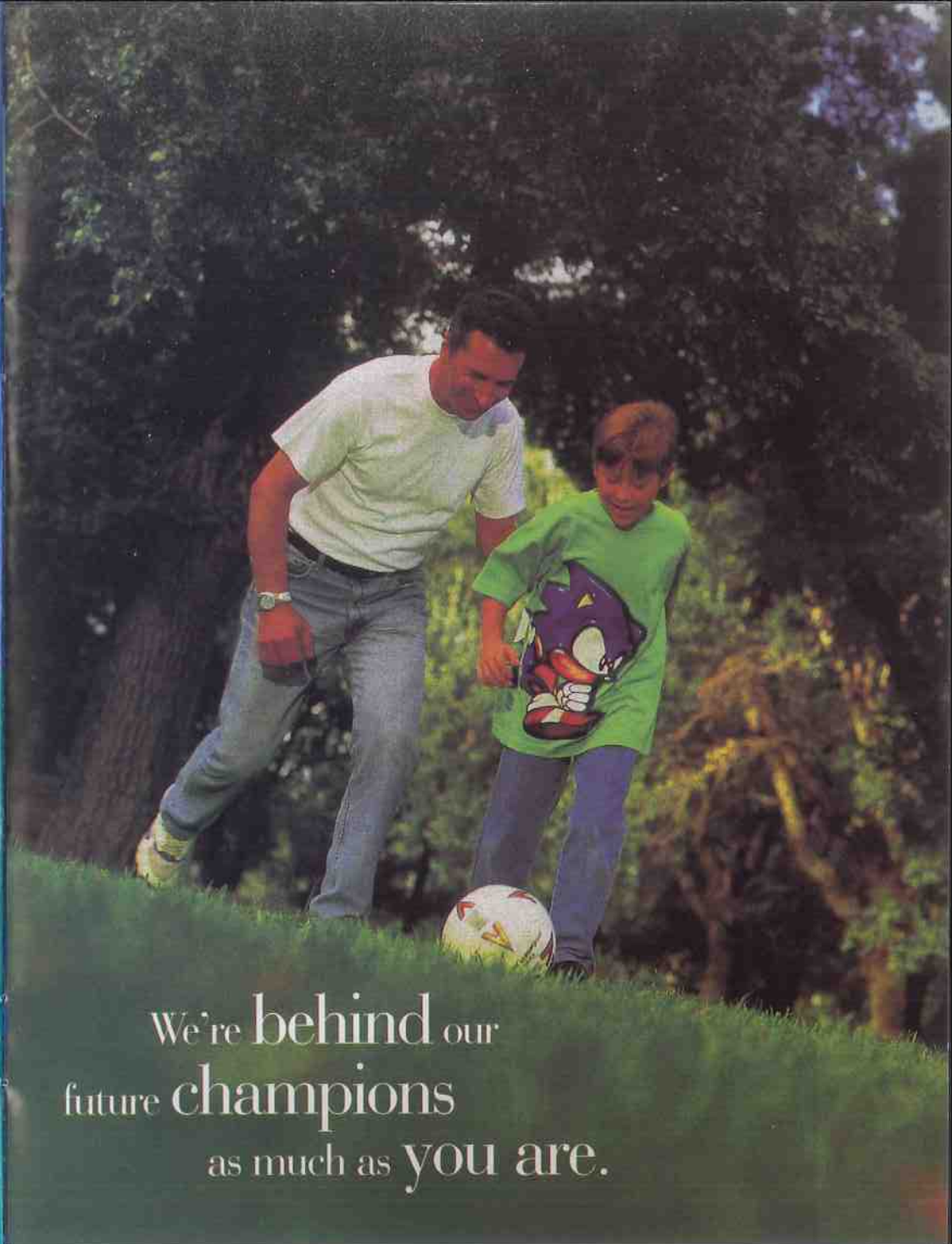
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AUSTRALIA'S WORLD CUP NIGHTMARE CONTINUES

If the Socceroo players and their coach, Terry Venables, did not appreciate the full ramifications of last year's World Cup disaster against Iran, they do now.

FIFA has recently decreed that for the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea, Australia will have a much tougher path. The Socceroos must play-off against the fifth-best South American team for the 32nd and final place.

This is the real price we pay for the MCG fiasco - our cause not helped by the subsequent humiliation in the final of the Oceania Nations Cup against New Zealand. Australia, the world champions in friendly matches, must start all over again. We are back among the also-rans. Consider our World Cup history, and you get the point. Since our first qualifying campaign 23 years ago, the Socceroos have played-off against teams from every other confederation on earth.

In order, they have been Asia (1965), Asia/Africa/Israel (1969), Asia (1973), Asia (1977), Asia (1981), Europe (1985), South America (1989), Central/North America and South America (1993) and Asia in 1997.

The recurring theme is that Oceania is not strong enough to deserve a place on its own. The region's ordinary World Cup record (just two finals appearances in nine attempts) makes it hard to disagree.

But what is not fair is that the path keeps changing. Asia is where our future lies, and it is in Asia where we should be contesting the right to participate in the World Cup. And yet FIFA keeps shuffling us across the globe.

We were led to believe that new FIFA president Sepp Blatter would be more mindful of Australia's

unique circumstances - not least because his daughter has spent most of the past three years working for Soccer Australia. But he has let us down.

So instead of facing the prospect of playing-off in Asia, we now have to travel to the likes of Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Colombia or Chile - presuming we win Oceania of course.

Sure, it's not impossible. But compared to last year's hurdle against Iran, it's a huge task. There may be some hope of a reprieve, with both Oceania and Asia last week making strong protests to Zurich, but don't hold your breath.

Which brings us back to the MCG. It was said even before a ball was kicked that the Socceroos not only had the easiest qualifying route in our history, but the easiest path of any of the 171 nations which entered the competition.

The task involved just eight games (six of them at home) - none against a team ranked above Australia in the FIFA rankings. Throw

in the fact that we had arguably the best team in our history and a supposedly world-class coach, and you get some idea of what a debacle it really was. And now it is coming home to roost. FIFA have listened to the arguments of those who have reminded them of Australia's consistent failure in the World Cup, and responded in kind. This new, much tougher, qualifying system is the price we have been made to pay. We can whinge all we want, and there is no doubt what FIFA have come up with is grossly unfair. But at the end of the day, the Socceroos blew it. Big time.

* Michael Cockerill is a sportswriter for The Sydney Morning Herald and a commentator for Optus Vision.



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- 6 Luke CASSERLY
- 7 Kresimir MARUSIC
- 8 Robbie SLATER
- 9 Graham ARNOLD
- 10 Gabriel MENDEZ
- 11 Troy CRANNEY
- 12 James STUBBS-MILLS
- 13 Philip MOSS
- 14 Tony PERINICH
- 16 Daniel WATKINS
- 17 Paul BILOKAPIC
- 18 Paul WEARNE
- 19 Clayton ZANE
- 20 Peter BLAZINCIC
- 21 Michael CUNICO
- 22 Paul HENDERSON
- 23 Matthew LANGDON
- 25 Robert ENES
- 26 Adam SNYDER
- 29 Adem PORIC

GIPPSLAND FALCONS

MICHAEL COCKERILL'S PLAYER PROFILE

1. **Bojo JEVDJEVIC:** Flamboyant Bosnian goalkeeper, great shot-stopper but possibly weak under the high ball. Has taken over this season from Jim Kourtis, now at Sydney Olympic
2. **Michael ANDERSON:** Young defender, a VIS graduate. Had the misfortune of an own goal in the recent debacle against Wollongong Wolves.
3. **Manny GOTIS:** Club stalwart, and one of the few local products in the side. Solid defender, sometimes underrated.
4. **Nick PALAMARAS:** Form has been solid and expect strong performance at the back.
5. **Jeff HOPKINS:** Seasoned Welsh-born professional, arrived in Australia this season via a brief stint in Malaysia with Selangor. Formerly with Fulham, Crystal Palace and Reading, among other English clubs, and capped by Wales. Good organiser at the back, but has lost a yard of pace.
6. **Levent OSMAN:** Fringe member of the Australian Olympic squad. Can play at sweeper, stopper or in midfield. Nothing flashy, but gets the job done. Returned to Morwell this season after missing out on a contract in Turkey.
7. **Brian MACNICOL:** Journeyman Queenslander, has lived in Melbourne for almost a decade, and enjoyed a successful spell at Heidelberg United. Prefers playing down the right side, and a good crosser of the ball.
8. **Clayton BELL:** Former youth international who plays mainly in a defensive midfield role. Strong in the tackle, and has a high workrate.
9. **Lachlan ARMSTRONG:** Back for his second stint at the club after giving the NSL a miss for the past 18 months to concentrate on his work. Still short of match fitness, but a robust striker with a good eye for goal. Once had a spell in Scotland with Dundee.
10. **Archie THOMPSON:** The outstanding talent in the squad, and a member of the Australian Olympic squad. Quick, lively and skilful, was on

the shopping list of Graham Arnold early this season.

11. **John HUTCHINSON:** Left-sided midfielder with great potential, but needs to get more involved. Will improve with experience.

12. **Peter DI IORIO:** Lively striker whose progress has been hampered by injury since bursting onto the NSL scene a couple of seasons ago with now-defunct Collingwood Warriors.

13. **Claudio CANOSA:** Argentine-born veteran renowned for his rugged play. These days assistant coach to Stuart Munro, and used only sparingly.

14. **Marco PERINOVIC:** Hardened veteran, the scourge of goalkeepers for over a decade with his robust style. Rescued from retirement in his native Canberra early this season, but has struggled to make an impact.

15. **Andy VARGAS:** Another Australian Olympic squad member, a skilful, creative player who sometimes struggles in the physical contests. Enjoyed a spell as a professional in his native Chile.

16. **Billy MITROULAS:** Hardly seen any first team action this season - surprisingly so.

17. **Will HASTIE:** Captain and a natural leader, the former youth international had spells in Scotland (he was an apprentice at Celtic) and Ireland before returning home.

18. **Robbie PUCA:** Young Western Australian winger who joined Gippsland this season after believing he wouldn't get much of a go with Perth Glory.

19. **Paul BYRNE:** Another talented young midfielder who is probably being given too much responsibility too early.

21. **Adrian SAVAGE:** In his first season in the NSL, has had limited opportunities.